

ELITE

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CUSTOM STAIRS ARTISTRY & ELEGANCE ELEVATED

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Style

In

Up

STEPPING

Custom staircases infuse artistry and personality into the home

By Corinne Johnson
Photos by Malinda Roberts

Today's homeowners have a discriminating flair for luxury and are stepping up in style to include beautiful grand-scale staircases in their homes. What might have once been simply a means of transportation to the next floor of a home has become a work of art which serves as an extraordinary design element that truly expresses the homeowner's individual personality and style.

The staircase in the foyer or entrance is often referred to as the "centerpiece," or focal point, of the home because it is such a dominant architectural component, one which utilizes large vertical forms of space. "When you enter someone's home, it's natural for the eyes to go up and admire the architecture and design of a stunning staircase," said Gloria Jones, an interior designer and president of Gloria J. Jones Ltd, in Olympia Fields. "A beautiful staircase is your set focus point in a house, and it's much like an art piece."

A beautiful staircase isn't limited to prominent areas of the home, such as the entryway or foyer, according to Kathy Dickinson, president of Kathy Dickinson Designs, Corp. in Oak Brook. "A luxurious home today doesn't always have to have a staircase in the foyer. It's not mandatory. It could be off the main hallway or it could be part of the main hallway."

The importance of form complementing function is evident in this Bur Ridge home.







Intricate details and rail/post styles can make the average staircase extraordinary.



Dickinson added that it is common for larger homes to have more than one staircase, and not uncommon to have two staircases in a "luxury" home.

Usually an entire team of professionals, including an architect, interior designer, general contractor, homeowner and staircase builder are involved in building a custom staircase for a new or existing home. Together, they determine the various materials and design elements which will be used to create a luxurious yet functional staircase.

According to Gary Waters, president and owner of Customwood Stairs, Inc., which has been manufacturing and installing stairs since 1967, whether it is his local or out-of-state clients, there has been a definite increased demand for luxury and custom staircases.

This specialized skills and approach needed to create a custom staircase, along with the materials, is what you pay for. Ask Waters, whose Romeoville shop caters to the south and western suburbs, and he will describe the craftsmanship that goes into a staircase design as more of a refined art, an odd mix of math and carpentry skills together with the great visualization skills needed to create memorable designs.

A custom staircase must reflect the style of the home while being attractive and functional. Waters said it was essential

"to have good taste for what works well with different styles of staircases."

Building a staircase is a unique blend of carpentry and artistry, agrees David Lautenbach, co-owner of Roseland Stair Works, Inc. in Orland Park, which has been customizing staircases since 1914 and has built stairs in hundreds of luxury homes as well as the Chicago Hilton & Towers and the Peabody Museum in Boston.

While Lautenbach creates some components for his staircases as standard, others

can be custom-ordered, and, he said, no two staircases are alike. In fact, he considers each one an original work of art.

THE ESCALATION

In the Midwest, red oak wood has long been considered the standard for staircases. But homeowners throughout the area are now selecting other types of woods with variations in color and grain. "We are seeing a variety of different materials such as white oak, Brazilian cherry, American cherry, walnut and maple," said Waters.

There are many shapes and configurations a staircase can take, according to Lautenbach, who works along with his two brothers, Ken and Laurence "Lars," to develop and build their famous staircase creations. "There are basically three types of stairs: a straight stair, a circular/curved stair and a spiral stair,





but there are many configurations and variations within those," he explained.

From the designer's standpoint, the size of a staircase depends on the size of the home. "It's important that the staircase be constructed in proper scale," noted Dickinson. "Grand staircases should be in grand homes. You wouldn't allocate 400 square feet for a staircase and put it in a 2,000-square-foot home. The relationship and proportion of the staircase and the home should have a direct correlation," she said.

The tread (the horizontal part of the step) and a riser (the vertical part of the step) together create the actual step of a staircase, and a staircase can be either open (with no risers), or enclosed (with risers). Stringers are another essential component because they support the treads and risers.

A grand traditional home might feature treads and risers made of elegant hardwoods, fine marbles or sleek granites. An extremely modern design might feature an open staircase with acrylic or glass as the tread. "You have to have the house that is fitting for the stair," said Lars Lautenbach.

Depending on the blueprint, designing a staircase can be a very simple or extremely complicated

process. "You're working with a lot of different pieces," he explained. "Stair building takes designing, creativity, planning and an understanding of the mechanics. It's a very individualized process, and every staircase will have different mechanics to make it work," he said.

According to Dickinson, homeowners should enjoy walking upstairs and an architect should be able to design the staircase with a comfortable rise. "Everybody should have a pleasant transfer when going from one floor to another, and homes that are built with an extreme eye to detail will always have a comfortable rise to the staircases," she explained.

THE BALUSTRADE

Many homeowners and designers will also customize and embellish the balustrade portion of a staircase – a series of vertical posts (balusters) that support the handrail. The newel post is usually the first main structural vertical post and serves as an anchor for the balustrade system. According to Waters, balustrade systems can depict a variety of styles such as Colonial, Traditional, Old English or Country French.

Balustrade systems can be hand-

LE MONT

This year's celebration includes a vast array of activities for kids of all ages. The event starts off with the costume parade at 1 p.m. at Legion Park. Residents & visitors can participate in the carved or painted pumpkin decorating contest or the costume judging contest and hayrides which leave regularly from downtown.

The Hillbilly Clan Band and performer M. Dvorak will provide the entertainment. Children's games are planned and the moon jump will keep them hopping for hours. Lions with a sweet tooth will love the candy distributed by local business owners. Those participating in the event will have an orange pumpkin displayed in their store window to welcome trick-or-treaters. The afternoon drive to a close at 4 p.m.

Don't miss this classic holiday tradition!



Halloween Hoedown

carved of fine woods and can showcase a variety of unique wood, metal or glass design elements. Imagine twisted iron or fine oak balusters embellished with brass tulip inserts, a scrolled etched glass insert, or maybe even bronze and iron scrolled panels. How about a solid, curved glass balustrade? The possibilities are endless, depending of course on the homeowner's individual preferences and budget.

According to Dickinson, iron balusters have become very popular in the Midwest, a style that has been popular in Europe and the Mediterranean countries such as Italy and Spain for centuries. A wooden handrail frequently accompanies iron balusters for a distinctive European look.

Don Chase, owner of Chase Stairwerks, Inc. in Mokena, said the balustrade systems that incorporate iron have become a design trend. In addition, mission style staircases are once again becoming quite popular.

According to Chase, Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood features many luxury homes with maple mission style staircases. It's a very plain design with boxed newel posts and can tie in a homeowner's antiques as well as compliment the more modern styles of furniture and accessories, he said.

A customized staircase can range in price anywhere from several thousand to more than \$100,000 depending on size, shape and materials used. According to industry experts, homeowners who are considering installing a customized staircase should visit showrooms and galleries or ask for references to solicit opinions on potential contracted work. ■



The most basic need – elevating to the second floor – is met with this staircase, which manages to accentuate an entire wall of this Wheaton home.